



Hai Ah Nam

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The power of yes

In 1999, the Computer, Computational and Statistical Sciences Division's Hai Ah Nam left graduate school for a summer hiatus to take care of her ailing father and save a marriage that was cracking under the grad school pressure. The summer hiatus ended up lasting five years.

"I had a master's degree in physics at that point," Nam says, "but it wasn't getting me anywhere in southern California. I went to work in the internet industry for a while and then taught high school math, but it wasn't fulfilling that part of me that wanted to know more, do more."

By now a single parent with an 18-month-old daughter, Nam sat down at her desk one evening and took stock.

"I felt nearly as lost as when I had first gone off to college," Nam recalls. "I loved physics, but I did not see a path forward and needed to take a step back."

Nam was at a turning point and in the end decided to join another graduate school, but this time a joint doctoral program in computational science through San Diego State University and Claremont Graduate University.

"Going back to school when everyone else was at least five years younger and didn't have to rush home after classes to struggle with the joys of potty training was tough," Nam notes with a smile. "I had to push down a lot of insecurities and convince myself that the sacrifice would pay off."

While spending her summers at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, Nam was asked whether she would be interested in helping the 2007 Student Cluster Competition as a volunteer. Although she was not sure what the competition entailed or how to fit it into her busy schedule, she said yes and was glad she did. The initial yes ended up leading to a wide variety of professional development and networking opportunities, including staff positions at Oak Ridge National Laboratory and now Los Alamos, and a new husband to boot.

Student Cluster Competition

Since volunteering for her first Student Cluster Competition, Nam has been an active member of the event's organizational team and in 2010 served as that year's Student Cluster Competition chair.

“Over 10,000 high-performance computing professionals and students from all over the world attend the Supercomputing Conference annually, which includes the Student Cluster Competition,” Nam explains. “Students from as far away as Australia, Colombia and China compete on the global stage to build and operate powerful cluster computers—smaller versions of high-capacity supercomputers—and everyone has a lot of fun.”

But offering chances to compete and have fun are only part of the event’s contributions.

“The Student Cluster Competition provides students with training beyond what they are able to get through their universities,” Nam says, “and they learn about new research, have a chance to network and get a taste of future career paths that they probably never even knew existed.”

One of the networking connections Nam was fortunate to make at the 2007 Student Cluster Competition resulted in her position as a computational nuclear physicist at Oak Ridge, and while working on Oak Ridge’s Jaguar supercomputer Nam met her second husband. The couple recently moved to Los Alamos to take on additional projects and be closer to her husband’s family.

Sharing yes

Today, Nam continues to be passionate about networking and saying yes to opportunities, collaborations and new adventures, regardless of which profession one is in.

“You never know what great things might be possible,” Nam suggests. “In my case, I’ve never done anything in a straight line. I initially was a French major in college by modeling myself after my favorite high school teacher, Mr. Lessard. I thought I might study international business and then somehow fulfill my father’s dream of having me become the next Connie Chung. Yet in the end, my current work is the perfect fit for me and a great platform for working with students and helping them find their own direction.”

Nam looks thoughtfully at her laptop computer before resuming.

“Purchasing a supercomputer is not like buying a desktop model, where you power it on and follow instructions,” she explains. “Each gigantic, interconnected machine needs a very large, multi-disciplinary community to plan, install, manage and effectively and efficiently use it. This is especially true right now of Los Alamos’ new Trinity system, which is leading the U.S. into a new supercomputing era. I’m extremely excited to be part of the Trinity effort and the large-scale multi-physics applications that will run on it.”

But Nam would like to see more women consider high-performance computing as a career option.

“Working with supercomputers not only allows you to help solve the most complex problems in science, engineering and business, but it also offers a lot of flexibility,” Nam notes. “If you have to stay home with a sick child, you can still have a productive day from your home office as long as you are connected to the internet.”

Nam is excited to chair the Student Cluster Competition again during the 2015 Supercomputing Conference this fall.

“I’m looking forward to blasting off the starting horn, admiring the hard work the students have put into getting ready for the competition and watching the high-performance computing community rally for the next generation,” Nam says. “Even more exciting will be seeing the students use the competition as a launching pad for their next step. I hope they’ll take the risk and say ‘yes.’”

Nam works for the Computer, Computational and Statistical Sciences Division’s Computational Physics and Methods group.

Resources

- [2015 Supercomputing Conference \(SC15\)](#)
- [Highlights from previous Student Cluster Competitions](#)
- [How the Student Cluster Competition Transforms Students' Experiences](#) (Video, 1:56)
- [Trinity to Trinity, 1945-2015](#) (Video, 7:40)

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